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SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS LEADERS NOTE POSITIVE TRENDS, ONGOING ISSUES

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¶1. (U) Summary. During his farewell trip to Ho Chi Minh City August 5-8, Ambassador Marine had a series of meetings with religious leaders, including Catholic Cardinal Pham Minh Man, the leaders of the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV), and leaders of several house church groups, to discuss the current state of religious freedom in Vietnam. Religious leaders presented a generally positive picture of conditions for their followers, but noted that recognition and registration issues remain in some areas where officials were not familiar with the new legal framework on religion. At each meeting, the Ambassador affirmed USG support for religious freedom has not diminished since Vietnam's removal from the list of Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) late last year and noted our continued willingness to follow up with the GVN on specific issues religious groups are facing as they arise. End Summary.

CARDINAL MAN ON POLITICS OF RELIGION

¶2. (SBU) During their August 7 meeting, Cardinal Man told Ambassador Marine conditions for the Catholic Church have been generally positive since the new legal framework on religion was introduced in 2004, noting the Diocese no longer needed advance permission to ordain priests. The biggest issue their seminaries face is finding enough teachers for all the new seminarians. Man said the Church continues to press the GVN for return of confiscated properties with little success. Ambassador Marine said the return of church properties was an ongoing dialogue many religious groups were having with the GVN, and while the United States Mission would continue to raise the issue on the Church's behalf, resolution was a long-term prospect.

¶3. (SBU) Cardinal Man said regional politics were at play in the GVN's recent rejection of two candidates for Bishop positions, noting he had heard some individuals in both the GVN and in northern Dioceses of the Catholic Church did not want to see "too many Southerners" in key posts. On GVN-Vatican relations, Man said a formal relationship seemed to be far away due to reluctance on both sides to move things forward too quickly.

¶4. (SBU) The Ambassador raised the issue of President Nguyen Minh Triet's interview with CNN during his visit to the United States, noting Vietnamese newspapers had quoted Triet as saying that the Vietnam Bishops' Council and the Vatican were in agreement with the GVN position that the trial of dissident priest, Father Nguyen Van Ly, was not a religious matter. Man said he had refuted the President's claim in an article that was posted on an overseas Catholic news website, adding that the Chairman of Bishops' Council had also written a letter to President Triet voicing the Council's disagreement with Triet's comments to the press.

15. (SBU) The Ambassador said that while he was pleased that the GVN appears to have accepted a greater role for religious organizations in performing charitable and humanitarian work, he understood the Church is still having trouble getting Catholic NGOs licensed to carry out HIV/AIDS and orphan-related work in Ho Chi Minh City. Man replied that while the Church was recently able to purchase land to open a center just outside Ho Chi Minh City, its application for NGO status was still pending.

In parting, Ambassador Marine renewed Mission Vietnam's offer to take up the Church's issues with the GVN if desired and encouraged the Catholic Church to engage with the GVN on upcoming revisions to the legal framework on religion.

PROTESTANT LEADERS GENERALLY OPTIMISTIC

16. (SBU) On August 6 and 7, Ambassador Marine paid two separate calls on leaders of the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) and a group of Protestant house church representatives (including branches of the Baptist, Seventh Day Adventists, Mennonites, Vietnam Good News Mission, United Gospel Outreach Church, and Assembly of God).

17. (SBU) In both meetings, Protestant leaders said that the vast majority of their congregations have no difficulty practicing their faith. In places where they have successfully registered churches, they experience little or no GVN interference with their religious activities. Churches that routinely provided local authorities with detailed information about members and meetings also seemed to experience fewer issues than those who did not. House church leaders echoed the sentiments of the Catholic Church and said that although conditions are generally improving, they have ongoing difficulties getting the GVN to return seized properties and problems registering new meeting points in areas where local officials were not familiar with the new legal framework on religion. Several house church leaders noted that in remote

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areas of the Central Highlands and Mekong Delta, local authorities sometimes claim no knowledge of the recognition/registration process, often refusing to even acknowledge receipt of a congregation's application. In these areas, church leaders also reported more incidents of police harassment and disbandment of gatherings. Many leaders also commented that tensions with authorities increase in areas where there are higher numbers of ethnic minorities.

18. (SBU) In contrast to the generally positive picture portrayed by most house church pastors, Pastor Nguyen Ngoc Hien (aka Pastor Henry) of Vietnam Baptist Fellowship Church (VBFC) said he and his followers have been experiencing steady interference and harassment from GVN authorities ever since he criticized GVN treatment of Protestants during his meeting with Secretary Rice in Hanoi last November. Since then, Pastor Henry

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said authorities have asked for detailed reports regarding his visits with Baptist groups in Cambodia, confiscated his passport and have tried to take him to court for his alleged involvement in a land rights dispute. Pastor Henry said his congregations have reported being pressured by police to provide detailed information on members and their financial holdings. Congregations that resist have had their meetings broken up and Bibles confiscated. Pastor Henry said he has reported specific incidents to the Public Security Bureau, but has received no resolution. Ambassador Marine expressed his sympathy and assured Pastor Henry that the United States Mission would raise his case with GVN once he provides detailed documentation of the incidents of harassment.

19. (SBU) The Ambassador expressed his appreciation for the leaders' frank and honest feedback and said the United States Mission would be happy to raise specific issues and incidents with the central and provincial GVN authorities if the churches

so desired. He asked that churches provide detailed information to us for follow up. The Ambassador also encouraged Protestant leaders to develop a regular dialogue on the religious recognition/registration process with the GVN, perhaps through quarterly correspondence or meetings with GVN's Committees on Religious Activities, both on the national and provincial levels.

¶10. (SBU) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi and cleared by Ambassador Marine.
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